



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

'Your Mother, You Bury Her': Caste, Carcass and Politics in Contemporary India

Author(s): Shivani Kapoor

Source: *Pakistan Journal of Historical Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Animals Without Borders (Summer 2018), pp. 5-30

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/pjhs.3.1.02>

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/pjhs.3.1.02?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/pjhs.3.1.02?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pakistan Journal of Historical Studies*

JSTOR

# **‘Your Mother, You Bury Her’:**

## **Caste, Carcass and Politics in Contemporary India**

*Shivani Kapoor*

*O.P. Jindal Global University*

**ABSTRACT:** The paper examines a single moment of defiance by the lower-caste leatherworking castes against the violence perpetuated against them by the Hindu Right groups in India on charges of killing and consuming the holy cow. The paper argues that when these lower-caste groups deliberately threw cattle carcasses into the public, instead of ‘cleaning’ them up as ritually required, they inaugurated the carcass as a political subject. In constituting itself around death, the animal carcass complicates the idea of the sacred animal put forth by the Hindu Right, thereby introducing a distinct kind of affect into the political public—the affect of rot and decay. By throwing these carcasses out from the slaughterhouses, abattoirs and tanneries into the full public sensorium, the leatherworking castes introduce caste, with all its sights, tastes and odours, into the political public. The paper thus argues for considering the carcass as a specific kind of malodourous political subject.

**KEYWORDS:** Caste; cow; animal bodies; India

In November 2017, the Government of India withdrew its notification banning the sale and purchase of cattle for slaughter from animal markets after several state governments reported negatively on the impact that the notification was having on livelihoods and trade revenues of sectors such as leather tanning, shoes and leather goods production and meat processing.<sup>1</sup> The notification titled, ‘The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Markets) Rules,’ 2017 (henceforth Rules), issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, had come into force on 23 May 2017. An immediate outcome of

*Pakistan Journal of Historical Studies*, Vol. 3 • Summer 2018, pp. 5–30  
Copyright © 2018 *Khaldunia Centre for Historical Research*. doi:10.2979/pjhs.3.1.02

the Rules was the collapse of small scale industries such as shoe manufacture and local butchers, as well as diminished earnings in large scale meat and leather export houses, endangering precarious lives and livelihoods. The Rules and its withdrawal mark an important moment in understanding the location that the animal occupies in contemporary political discourse in India. In particular, in its relatively short life span, the Rules foreground the entrenchment of one specific animal—the cow—in the caste lives of the nation and its communities.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the economic impact, it was the social and political consequences of the Rules which are of interest here. The Rules provide an official veneer for the illegal actions of various Hindu religious and political outfits which specifically targeted Muslim and Dalit individuals who form the majority of those involved in the meat and leather trades, in transporting cattle and, significantly for this paper, those involved in disposing cattle carcasses.<sup>3</sup> These violent attacks were however not unprecedented. The older politico-religious discourse around the cow, which considers it to be a ‘sacred mother’, has been on a renewed ascendance since May 2014 when the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) government came into power at the centre. In March 2015, the BJP-led Maharashtra state government passed the Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Act, 1995, which banned the slaughter of bulls and bullocks, in addition to the already existing ban on the slaughter of cows. Significantly, the Act also made it punishable by law to possess the meat of cows, bulls and bullocks, in the state and even outside of it.<sup>4</sup>

Though the Act was applicable only to the state of Maharashtra, the consequences of this law were felt throughout the country, with an increase in the number of physical attacks by self-styled *gau-rakshaks* (protectors of cow) on people either suspected of possessing beef or facilitating slaughter of cows. Crucially, this Act thus inaugurated “possession” of a certain kind of meat as an illegal act, thereby putting under suspicion anyone found in possession of or in the act of consuming meat, until it was forensically proven that the said meat was not beef. The Rules further augmented this suspicion and gave a legal

status to doubt, rumour and hearsay and the actions of these non-state actors, raising incidents of violence against Dalits and Muslims to unprecedented level.<sup>5</sup> There were several kinds of responses to these acts ranging from demands for legislative and legal remedies to protest marches and even instances of counter-violence.

While many of these demands did not bear significant results, two interesting trends have been observed within this discourse. First is the specific significance that the cow has acquired within this political discourse. The animal was previously understood primarily through the lens of animal rights. Further discussion on the subject has happened in thinking about animality and the human-animal relationship. The sacred animal of the Hindu discourse, which is now almost a political-legal entity, provides a different vantage point from which to navigate these understandings of the animal. Second, the obverse of this sacred animal is to be found in the anti-caste Dalit discourse, especially among the leatherworking communities which have been forced to have an intimate relationship with the animal carcass. This paper explores the relationship between the animal and its carcass, particularly that of the sacred cow and its rotting carcass. In doing so, the paper foregrounds death as the concept through which to understand the relationship of this animal to caste, specifically through the caste-based occupation of leatherwork to explore the affectual and material significance of the insertion of caste through malodour, rot, decay and disgust into what can be called the anaesthetised political discourse, making the carcass a specific kind of malodourous political subject.

### **Death comes to Una**

On 11 July 2016, several self-appointed Hindu *gau-rakshaks* forcibly entered the house of Balu Sarvariya in the Mota Samadhiyala village of Gir Somnath District of Gujarat. Seven people present inside the house were assaulted and four of the men were tied up, stripped, flogged and then marched for about twenty-five kilometers to the town of Una. These men claimed

that they had been employed by the village *sarpanch* to dispose the carcass of an already dead cow, as a part of their occupation in the village. In an interview given after the Una lynching, Pawan Pandit, the head of the Bhartiya Gau Rakshak Samiti said, “If a cow is being slaughtered, you should know that the foundation of the country is being slaughtered ... she is the mother of 80 percent Bharat”.<sup>6</sup>

For the next two days, Dalit activists took out protest rallies in Chandkheda and Trikon Baug in Una. By 21 July, the matter had reached Rajya Sabha (the Upper House of the Parliament) where Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and the head of Bahujan Samaj Party, a predominantly Dalit party, demanded that the perpetrators be brought to justice. Several accused were arrested and a judicial case was filed under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1986, which seeks to remedy and punish such acts of violence against marginalised groups. In spite of assurances by Anandiben Patel, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, that the case will be tried within sixty days, as of now, the case has not been shifted to the special atrocities court in Junagarh and is being heard by an Additional Sessions Judge in Una. On being denied bail by the Junagarh court, the accused appealed to the Gujarat High Court, which granted bail to twelve out of forty-six of them.

Simultaneously, a grassroots movement of Dalit groups led by an activist Jignesh Mevani, was taking shape in these areas. A Dalit Mahasammelan (Grand Gathering) was held on 31 July, which led to the formation of a broad alliance, Una Dalit Atyachar Ladat Samiti, under whose banner the Mevani-led protest march, ‘Dalit Asmita Yatra’ (Pride/Identity Procession), reached Una from Ahmedabad on 15 August. Thousands of Dalit who were part of this march took a pledge to give up working with the carcass and, in a significant move, demanded land for meeting their livelihood needs. An interesting slogan of the march was, ‘Keep the cow’s tail, give us our land’. As a result, in collective action, Dalit groups threw rotting cattle carcasses outside district government offices with another slogan, ‘Your

mother, you bury her'. Additionally, postcards were sent to the ambassador of Gujarat tourism, popular film actor, Amitabh Bacchhan, with the slogan, '*Badboo Gujarat Ki*' (The Stench of Gujarat), to counter the official slogan, '*Khushboo Gujarat Ki*' (The Fragrance of Gujarat).<sup>7</sup>

These powerful moves were both political and symbolic in nature. Aware of the strong polluting capacity of the carcass as well as the fact that their caste status will not allow upper-castes to handle it, these Dalit groups struck at the core of the caste system. The rotting and malodorous carcass lying in public spaces also provided a strong sensual marker of the breakdown of the caste norms—these sights and odours are supposed to be taken care of through 'untouchable' labour, without coming into contact with the upper-caste sensorium. The well thought out move to offend this sensorium by upending the carefully calculated purity-polluting matrix was thus an extraordinary moment of Dalit resistance. The demand for land, in exchange for the carcasses, further augmented the political and material nature of this protest.

Mevani gave a second call for a follow-up march, 'Azadi Kooch' (Freedom March), a year later in July 2017 to commemorate the Una struggle. However, the Sarvariya family was reportedly unsure of joining the march, citing absolute disregard by the state authorities and political activists, including Mevani, once the initial political furore had died down. After a prolonged struggle with the district administration in Dhanera taluka in the northern part of Gujarat, members of the rally were ensured that four Dalit families from Lavara village in the area received three acres of land each.<sup>8</sup> In December 2017, Mevani won the state assembly elections for the Vadgam constituency in Gujarat as an independent candidate.

It is not incidental that the spate of *gau-rakshak*-led violence targeted the leatherworking castes, those involved in the slaughtering or in the leather tanning industry. It is also not incidental that almost all of the victims of the lynching have been either lower caste or Muslim. Carcass and its products like leather are not just malodorous and disgusting, within the norms of the

Hindu caste system, they are also highly polluting objects for the ostensibly pure 'upper' castes. Consequently, it is only the 'lower', 'untouchable' castes or Muslims who are forced to deal with this carcass. This carcass then becomes the political and affectual counterpoint to the Hindu idea of the cow as a sacred and pure animal.

### **Producing the 'Holy' Cow**

The Rules and the ensuing violence are by no means unprecedented in the Indian context. The sacred status of the cow finds its bearings in and through a wide range of discourses including the religious, ethical, economic and political. This section will bring together some of these perspectives in order to provide a background to understanding the symbolic and political significance of the carcass.

India has one of the largest bovine populations in the world which adds significantly to the economy of the country, especially for its agrarian population.<sup>9</sup> According to the 2012 Livestock Census, India has 190.9 million cattle and 108.7 million buffalo which account for roughly 300 million bovine population.<sup>10</sup> India is also one of the largest producers of milk in the world with a production of 137.7 million tonnes in the year 2013–14.<sup>11</sup> Meat production stood at 6.2 million tonnes in 2013–14.<sup>12</sup> The Food Balance Sheet for India in 2005 indicates that in terms of tonnage, 'bovine' meat is the most highly-produced and consumed meat product after fish.<sup>13</sup> Beef, as the 'common man's diet', is significantly the cheapest meat product available in the country.<sup>14</sup>

Other than being important for the agrarian and the food industries, cattle are also important in other industries such as leather production, animal feed, gelatine and glue. These industries utilise the dead cattle and its carcass as some of their raw products. Among these the leather industry is one of the largest earners in the Indian industrial sector. The annual turnover of this industry stood at 10–12 billion USD in 2014–15, of which exports alone account for 6.5 billion USD.<sup>15</sup> The estimated market size of the industry is pegged at 250 billion USD (Rs 25,000

crore) and the industry employs close to 20–25 lakh people (2–2.5 million), of which a significant number come from the Dalit and Muslim communities. According to the Council of Leather Exports (CLE), currently India is the second largest producer of footwear and leather goods in the world and the third largest exporter of leather goods.

Buffalo leather is the mainstay of this leather production, mainly because of the abundance of the animal in the subcontinent. Cow leather in India is generally of a much inferior quality and smaller size than is required in the international market, and thus is not used very frequently in the production process.<sup>16</sup> These facts notwithstanding, in the popular imagination, leather production is viewed largely through its reliance on the slaughter of the cow, mainly due to the Hindu religious and political propaganda around this animal beginning around the late nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

The political campaigns around the cow emphasising its sacred status took a consolidated shape with the beginning of the Cow Protection movements in parts of Northern India around the late nineteenth century. The first *gau-rakshini* sabha (Committee for the Protection of the Cow) began in 1882 with the support of Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement.<sup>18</sup>

Article 48 of the Constitution of India, which details the Directive Principles of State Policy, lays down the constitutional position on the cow as follows:

The State shall endeavour to organize agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and other milch and draught animals.

The Directive Principles, unlike the Fundamental Rights, are not legally enforceable and thus the protection of the cow, in effect, remains a suggestion or a guideline for the state rather than becoming a law. Legal scholar Shraddha Chigateri, writing on the legal and constitutional position of cow protection argues

that in the Constituent Assembly debates a few representatives demanded the insertion of cow protection into Fundamental Rights on the basis of the usefulness of the cow in the agrarian economy and the value of its products for the population at large.<sup>19</sup> It was also argued by the same representatives that cow slaughter is 'not an essential practice' for the Muslim communities, and thus a ban on it should not be opposed by them. In fact, these representatives argued that for the creation of a united nation, practices such as cow slaughter must be banned and this ban must be accepted by the Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

It was mainly due to B.R. Ambedkar, India's strongest anti-caste voice and the father of the Indian Constitution, that cow protection was placed in the Directive Principles and formulated in a language of science rather than religion. An interesting aspect of this debate came in the form of Muslim representatives who argued that cow protection should be made a Fundamental Right, and the logic should be religious because this would be an unambiguous position and it would be easier to argue for the ban on cow slaughter within their communities. Chigateri also points out that absent from this debate were the other beef eating communities such as Dalits and Christians.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, under the guise of concerns about an agrarian economy and concerns of a united nation, dominant and upper-caste Hindu ideas were inserted into the Constitution. In effect, this move collated the material aspects of cattle economy with its symbolic, caste and religious value, converting the cow into not just a constitutional subject but also one which is legally framed through its caste and religious location. The cow as this kind of subject found its social sanctions in the norms of caste and Hindu religion perpetuated through scriptures such as the Vedas, and books such as the Manusmriti.

Within the Hindu religious discourse, the cow is considered to be a mother and a symbol of purity and abundance. Cow's milk and other cow products such as manure and urine are used widely in upper-caste Hindu religious rituals for their potential to purify spaces and objects. For instance, cow dung is smeared on the sacrificial altar and along with ghee is known for

its purificatory abilities. The odour of cows and cow products, such as urine, ghee and dung are also considered to have such purificatory properties. James McHugh argues that, unlike the gods who are ritually associated with floral odours, the olfactory association of Brahmins is usually with food smells, in particular sacrificial foods derived from the cow, such as ghee and milk, or other animal products such as honey.<sup>22</sup> These products are considered ritually pure while the flesh and blood from the same animal is considered impure.<sup>23</sup> The same object or body, in this case the cow, can thus be the source of both pure and impure products. The difference lies in the provenance and use-value of these products. While blood and flesh arise out of death, milk and ghee from the live cow are invested with nutritive capacities. Given the close association of the Brahmin and the cow, it could be argued that the purity of the Brahmin derives from and is contingent on the body of the cow.

In a broad historical sweep, D.N. Jha examines the evidence against "the myth of the holy cow" and argues that the sanctity of the cow has been wrongly traced back to the Vedas. Jha writes, "Some sections of Indian society trace the concept of the sacred cow to the very period when it was sacrificed and its flesh was eaten".<sup>24</sup> In his opinion, there could have been serious injunctions against the killing of a cow belonging to the Brahmin but, other than that, at least in the Vedic period, the cow was neither sacred nor unslayable.<sup>25</sup>

This complex Hindu narrative around the cow changed due to the challenge of Buddhism to Vedic Hinduism around six century BC. Although Buddhism advocated compassion towards all living beings, the pragmatics of living in a meat-consuming society forced the Buddhist monks to consume meat whenever it was given to them as *bhiksha* (offering). Buddha himself is known to have placed no special condition against meat eating.<sup>26</sup> However, Buddhism did present a strong critique of Vedic ritualism, including that of animal sacrifice. Being caught on the decline, Vedic Hinduism thus had to assert its superiority *vis-à-vis* the Buddhists. These gustatory and ritualistic choices marked the Brahmins as being different from the Buddhists,

and the difference was then asserted as superiority.<sup>27</sup> Buddhists refused to adopt Hindu practices and continued to consume flesh of dead cows since it was cheap and readily available in an agrarian society. Relegated to the margins of society, these Buddhists were, in Ambedkar's formulation, those who we today call the Untouchables. Consuming the flesh of dead cattle thus became the marker for untouchability, while slaughtering cattle and other animals for ritualistic purposes and also for consumption still continues among many Hindu communities, including some Brahmin groups.<sup>28</sup>

However, in the political resurrection of the cow, these ambiguities were done away with and the cow became the most sacred animal of the Hindu order. The ensuing Cow Protection Movement which spread to various parts of Northern and Western India, soon began equating not just the cow to the mother, but also to the nation at large, bolstered by the already prevalent idea of *Bharat-mata* (Mother India). At various points and in different contexts, the other of this movement was either the Muslim, known for slaughtering the cow, or the Dalit, who were ritually forced to deal with the carcass and to consume the rotting flesh of dead cattle.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Sandra Freitag, talking about the antagonists of the Cow Protection Movement, observes that in places like Gorakhpur, which had a large population of higher class Muslims who practiced ritual slaughter, the movement's antagonist was the leatherworking Chamar.<sup>30</sup>

While the Muslim slaughterer was targeted for wilfully killing the cow, the leatherworkers were considered guilty for two reasons. First, they were accused of murdering the cow, often through arsenic poisoning, for the purpose of selling its hide and consuming its flesh. It is important to note that during the nineteenth century, leatherworkers would often carry arsenic on them or possess it at home because it was an important component of vegetable tanning. This possession was thus turned into suspicion and even crime, in a way foreshadowing the criminal possessing of beef in contemporary times.<sup>31</sup> Second, Dalits are ridiculed and considered 'dirty' because they consume meat of dead cattle. Since leatherworker castes are forced to dispose off

the carcass of fallen cattle, they also have access to its flesh. We will come back to the question of slaughter and food a little later in the section.

The conversion of the body of the animal into that of the nation and marking it with religion and caste proved to be a powerful move for the idea of the Hindu nation which could now be configured around this animal. The first of these is the economy of love and the ethics of care exercised in a dialogic fashion. The cow, as the mother, provides nourishment to her children in the form of milk, dung and even in its urine; in turn, the children protect the mother from harm. The second economy is the consumption of the carcass when death has taken away the sacredness of the animal, making it untouchable and disgusting. This consumption spanning the vast industrial outputs of leather (hide), glue (bones), gelatine (bones), flesh and animal feed (hooves and horns) is the economy of death, away from care and love. It is the crucial element of death that differentiates between the two ideas of the animal, the loving and nurturing mother and the disgusting carcass. It is also death which then prefigures this difference, as a matter of caste.

In the discussions over the recent spate of lynching, two crucial interventions were made in understanding the cattle and care economy by Tanuja Kothiyal,<sup>32</sup> a historian and Radhika Govindrajan, an anthropologist.<sup>33</sup> Kothiyal, providing a historical analysis of the figure of the *gau-rakshak* argues that the contemporary self-styled *gau-rakshaks* have no real relation to the cattle economy, since they are only invested in protecting the cattle, not rearing it. Thus they separate the sacrality of the cow from its material significance. Further, Kothiyal points out that historically, cattle-protectors/rearers existed in the same material economy as butchers, leather tanners and traders. While this is certainly true, Kothiyal, fails to underscore the two important ideas in this narrative. First, that while butchers, tanners, rearers and protectors of the cow, may have inhabited the same material economy, they were never a part of the same ritual and symbolic economy due to their differential locations in caste. Second, because butchers and tanners have a relationship with

the dead cattle—primarily due to their caste location—they inhabit a material economy framed by death, and not wealth or sacredness.

Replying to Kothiyal, Govindrajan, in a piece written on the ethics of care, love and violence in the human-animal relationship, makes a crucial argument. She points to the material and ethical divide which the Hindu Right's argument in favour of the cow derives from and is itself, "transgressed in the course of everyday relationships between people and the livestock animals that they care for". Love and care for the cow, in Govindrajan's argument then, does not only mean *gau-raksha* (protection of the cow) but also means being involved in the complex materiality around the cow, be it beef, leather or milk. What she is rightly hinting at is the deeply sensuous relation that animals come to have with humans which spans the material, ethical and domains of care and love. However, undergirding these ideas is the fundamental caste pollution of death, and of the carcass, which proves to be the limits of care and material economies as envisioned in the Hindu imagination. The economy of the carcass inhabited by the Dalit and the Muslim is a fundamentally different, maybe even unethical and uncaring idea for this imagination.

M.K. Gandhi, the prominent non-violent leader of the anti-colonial movement in India and one of the most vociferous advocates of the idea of the cow as the mother, understood this exchange between life and death in quite a sophisticated manner. Cow protection, he argued is the central fact of Hinduism.<sup>34</sup> Gandhi's ideas derive from a Hindu majoritarian understanding of food and life practices, nonetheless, it is important to note that in Gandhi's argument the material and the affectual mapped neatly on to each other in the case of the location of the cow in the needs of the nation. Matters became messy once similar arguments were made for other draft and milch animals such as the buffalo which, as has been noticed, is more abundant in the subcontinent than cows and thus provides cheaper milk which is also heavier in nutrients.

Gandhi argued that if one begins to prefer buffalo's milk over the cow's, it would be difficult to argue against slaughtering the cow. He suggests that we cannot "save" both the cow and buffalo from being slaughtered so we should stop the domestication of the buffalo and concentrate on the cow.<sup>35</sup> The affectual significance of the cow now becomes clearer and begins to overtake its material importance. Gandhi further delves into the question of the dead cow. He argues that leather made of fallen animals (animals which have died naturally) should be considered 'pure', at least by the Hindus,<sup>36</sup> and that he had no objection to wearing shoes made of fallen leather, adding that he would, in fact, enter the house and eat food wearing these shoes.<sup>37</sup>

In an astute move, taking account of the material economy of the carcass and the importance of the leather industry, Gandhi thus chose fallen leather over slaughtered leather thereby implicating not just the Muslim butcher but also the leatherworkers accused of forcibly killing the cow for its hide.<sup>38</sup> In a further move, he argues that the cow is profitable even in death and by promoting the consumption of its products such as hide and bones, one could make the domestication of the cow more desirable. Gandhi further states that while we condemn Harijans (which literally means 'the people of God' and was Gandhi's preferred name for Untouchables) who consume fallen meat, with the proper utilisation of the dead cow for leather, fertiliser and bones, Harijans will no longer *need* to consume fallen meat.<sup>39</sup> It is here that contemporary discourse diverges with Gandhi and goes on to condemning the slaughter and consumption of the cow under any circumstance, illustrating the point being made by Kothiyal and Govindrajan over the separation of the material and the affectual.

However, in arguing for the profitability of even a dead cow, Gandhi ignores the norms of caste which makes the cattle carcass undesirable in the first place. An effective economic utilisation of the carcass will not address the question of the stigma of consuming this carcass. Interestingly it was only much later, around the 1960s, that Dalit groups were able to posit animal

carcass as a “resource” in the public debate over its disposal.<sup>40</sup> For Gandhi however, the question of the status of cow was largely determined by his view of caste and untouchability, which in his view did not require a fundamental disruption of the Hindu social and ritual structure. Within this understanding of the Hindu caste system, not just fallen leather, but leather itself was considered “polluted” because of its animal provenance.

B.R. Ambedkar’s argument against Gandhi is instructive in this regard. Ambedkar writes:

No one would prefer carrion to fresh meat if it is available. If the Untouchables have been living on carrion it is not because they like it. They eat carrion because there is nothing else on which they can live. This will be clear to anyone who realises that on account of untouchability they have no way left to earn a living. All professions have been closed to them. There is no land on the produce of which they can live. There is no trade, which they can engage in. Their mainstay is therefore the food they collect from the villagers and the carrion which is left to them. Without carrion they would literally die of starvation. It is therefore clear that the fault does not lie with the Untouchables . . . If the Untouchables skin and carry the dead animals of the Hindus, it is because the Untouchables have no choice. They are forced to do it.<sup>41</sup>

The body of the animal and that of the nation are thus locked in an affective contestation which brings together caste and religion with the anxieties over the moral and physical status of the body of the nation. More importantly, these debates go on to demonstrate how the caste system invests objects with material and symbolic meanings which then come to have important implications for the bodies immersed in this system. This mapping of the values of pure and impure upon gustatory and occupational practices acquires a special charge due to the power matrix of the caste system. It is this matrix which spills over in moments like the Una protests to produce an affective discourse of counter-resistance. This discourse then utilises the sacrality of

the cow and its relationship with upper-caste Hinduism to make an argument against caste and against the idea of the Muslim or the Dalit as the one causing harm to the cow.

### **Carcass, Caste and the Politics of Senses**

Under the effects of modernity and the consequent ordering of urban spaces and bodies, around the middle of the nineteenth century in Europe and its colonies, cities were increasingly organised according to sanitarian ideas, leading to a separation between the animal and the human worlds. Animal bodies, along with their flesh, blood and refuse, came to be considered a threat and in the Indian context, this threat was not just that of the contamination of the physical body but that of the moral and spiritual body of the nation as well. For the Hindus who believed in the sacrality of the cow, this was even more complex. As discussed earlier, the physical body of the cow came to stand in as a metaphor for the nation and for the community.

The carcass is a further complication of this relationship. Within the discourses of caste, death is a moment of great ritual pollution. This pollution is permanent and transferable to the next generations for those lower-castes groups such as Dom (involved in the burial in of humans) and Chamar (engaged in the disposal of dead animals) who occupationally deal with disposal of dead bodies. By refusing to dispose the rotting cattle carcasses, the lower-caste leatherworking groups strongly invoked this fear of death's capacity to pollute.

The visibility of animals, of their flesh, blood and carcass is crucial to these narratives. Just as the visibility of the poor and of dirt gave rise to the imaginations of disease and contamination, the mere sight of the animal body within urban spaces gave rise to fears of disease and contamination and not just of the physical kind. The sight of slaughter created discomfort not just for humans but it was also thought of as being traumatic for the live cattle. A visual separation thus had to be maintained

between the slaughterhouse and public spaces, and within the slaughterhouse between the dead and live cattle. It was also proposed that meat be covered when it is peddled through the city, lest it offends the sensibilities of the Hindus.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, the remedy for the control of slaughterhouses also lay in visibility. Awadhendra Sharan, a historian, writing on the regulation of slaughtering within the city argues (while quoting historian Chris Otter) that “making slaughter public meant opening it to municipal vision, at the same time concealing it from the eyes of polite society”.<sup>43</sup>

The rise of animal rights activism and conservancy movements around the question of animals are symptomatic of the uneasy relationship of the animal to the human in the current context. Alison Vogelaar, writing about the visual representations of animal bodies, argues that much of this unease arises out of “seeing” the transition from production to consumption.<sup>44</sup> Increasingly, we are imagining spaces where one avoids or, at least, controls sensory contact with the spaces of production such as slaughterhouses, farms and factories. Both the animal and its death are masked in these spaces of consumption. However, a shift from vision to other sensory experiences such as odours provides an interesting analytical paradigm.

The malodour of the slaughterhouse, indicative of its status as a dirty space, also become visible and legible for the authorities once these spaces came under scrutiny. However, odours by their very nature are subversive in nature. While modern and sanitised slaughterhouses took effective care that the public is not witness to the act of slaughter, even the fortified structure could not contain the odours of flesh. In the absence of sight, it was thus odours which came to stand in for the alleged contamination caused by meat and slaughterhouses. The affective and corporeal significance of odour spills over to the object of leather as well. The process of flaying, and the flayers themselves, are even more hidden from the public imagination in the Indian context, mainly due to their lower-caste status. Slaughtering and leather industries are thus a contested terrain of arguments

over animal bodies, public space, sensory politics and politics of caste and religion. Senses and their crucial faculty of perception are not merely physical or biological phenomena but, like the physical body, sensorial perception is also rooted in societal systems of hierarchies, power and contestations. The slogan, '*Badboo Gujarat Ki*' (The Stench of Gujarat), mentioned earlier, thus hints at a deeper affectual politics of caste and bodies than simply indicating the physical discomfort caused by the presence of the rotting carcasses in public.

While the Hindu Right, the animal rights discourse and the Una protests seem to be invoking the presence of the animal body in public discourse, I argue that these are three fundamentally different moments of politics. The importance of animal rights campaigns lies in the way in which they have inserted the animal into the public imagination and have made available an affectual and sensual vocabulary through which issues of nonhuman animals can be articulated in public discourse. The Hindu Right's arguments for the cow stand at some distance from the arguments put forward by the animal rights and animal welfare groups. One of the major distinctions lies in the way in which one animal, namely the cow, is distinguished and separated from the other animals in the Hindu Right discourse. This discourse does not argue for a universal and broad idea of anti-specieism or for ethical treatment of all animals, but manages to raise one particular animal over all the others, including and significantly, the human.

Una protests represent a fundamentally different affectual engagement with the political and the public. This difference arises out of the qualitative shift in the nature of death and of the animal body which the Una protests bring forth. The invocation of sympathy, care or empathy in the animal rights discourse stands in strong contrast to death which marks the origins of leather within the discourses of caste. This death is qualitatively different because it is marked with a strong and permanent sense of caste-based pollution, a sense of pollution that fake blood and humans dressed as animals cannot possibly capture. Within these discourses of caste, objects made of leather cannot

possibly invoke empathy or care for the workers of leather. The object of the Una protests—the cow carcass—is significant for the simple reason that it was real, it rotted and it filled the public space with its stench. The carcass also turned the leatherworkers from potential recipients of empathy into powerful and disruptive political subjects. By marking the public discourse with the stench of the carcass, the Dalit protestors in Una effectively mark this public with caste.

The insertion of the animal and of caste into the public discourse opens up this space for questions of the animal-like as well. In the stance of giving up their intimate relationship to animals, the Dalit groups in Una mark their distance from animality—something that has traditionally and forcibly been imposed upon them. The political which has till now been based on the division of not just the human and the animal but also crucially on the distinctions between the human and the animal-like, will need to reconfigure itself to this disavowal. This does not simply represent a moment where the boundaries of what it means to be human, and political, will be or should be expanded to include these new entrants because central to the denial of animality, in this case, is the denial of caste and of the Brahmanical political. Una thus represents a moment of the corruption of the Brahmanical political. The political publics will have to reconfigure themselves taking into account the power of this pollution.

Caste has an intimate relationship with the carcass and with the idea of death. Dalit autobiographical narratives, such as *Murdhaiya* (Burial Ground) and *Manikarnika* (one of the main cremation grounds in Benaras), written by Tulsi Ram, have made powerful arguments about the way in which death—animal and human—is an integral component of the Dalit habitus. By bringing this death into the public discourse, the Dalit protestors also challenged ways in which caste is desensualised in the public discourse. In these publics, caste is neither smelled nor touched but is consumed in flattened ways, just as we consume finished leather, while dissociating with its production and provenance. The rotting carcass lying in public spaces force

an engagement with, first, the existence of caste in objects of everyday consumption like food, shoes and bags, and second, forces us to reckon with the sensuousness of caste, with not just the animal but also with the animal-like bodies.

## Conclusion

By reiterating the idea of the animal carcass as chaotic and disruptive of the established order, the Una protests thus introduce a distinct malodourous, disgusting subject of politics. This affection and disgust for the animal produces a certain ambiguity around the question of the animal in the political public and it is this ambiguity, with its odours and affects that make the animal an exciting political subject. The animal as the political subject introduces a certain affect and sensuousness into the political, which alters the very possibility of politics. This moment is significantly different from the earlier public disavowals of these occupations made by groups such as Jatavs of UP in the 1930s. The difference lies precisely in the possibility of politics that this disavowal offers, delinked from the question of social mobility and derived from the questioning of caste. The carcass challenges the idea of sacrality through the pollution and stench of death, it challenges consumption by the denial of the labour which converts the carcass into a consumable entity, such as leather and, most importantly, it overturns the relationship between upper-castes groups and death by enunciating, "Your mother, you bury her".

It is through this animal subject, and its odours, that the political can then be opened up to conversations around the animal-like as well. The paper examines Hindu Right's affective politics and the challenge of death and decay posited by the Dalit groups to argue for imagining the political public as also the space of the carcass. Seemingly the most inert of all subjects—the carcass—threatens to become the most powerful because of its capacity to pollute and to stink up the political. This animal also then refuses to become the anthropomorphic political subject, retaining as it were, its capacity to be a nuisance.

## Notes

1. Wire Staff, “Modi Government Likely to Withdraw Controversial Cattle Slaughter Ban,” (2017), <https://thewire.in/200905/cattle-slaughter-ban-bjp/> (accessed on 21 July 2018).

2. Caste is a complex system of graded hierarchy which frames the social organisation of people and groups within Hinduism. The system consists of four large varnas (groups) in order of hierarchy—Brahmins who are considered to be the purest and the purveyors of knowledge; Kshatriyas, the warriors; Vaisyas, the traders and Shudras, those who perform manual work. Beyond this lies the Atishudras, the untouchables, who perform the menial and polluting tasks such as cleaning, manual scavenging, leatherwork, and midwifery. Within each varna, lie many castes and sub-castes in a complex system of purity-pollution *vis-à-vis* each other. Caste status is ascribed at birth and is passed on generationally. Thus, while it seems that castes are organised according to labour and occupational status, the full import of the system lies in the fact that even though one may give up an ancestral profession like leatherwork, one does not give up her caste or pure-impure status.

3. While caste is absent in the scriptural versions of Islam and Christianity, because of their social and cultural location in India and also because a large number of Hindus, especially lower-caste Hindus convert to these two religions, there are pockets of Muslims and Christians who also practice the caste system socially and ritually. In this essay, when references are made to Muslims, it is this latter idea which is at play. Among the Muslims, it is the lower caste and lower-class groups such as Arzaals and Pasmandas which work with leather in terms of its actual production. Upper-class Muslims like the Sanyads, Qureshis and Pathans are often leather tannery and factory owners and do not face similar stigma of working with leather. However when it comes to the question of meat eating in general and beef eating in particular, it is Muslims in general who are in question. The lower-class Qureshi slaughterer or the Dalit Khatik caste which also deals in slaughter of pigs, are particularly targeted by the Hindu Right groups. Recently, even the upper-class Qureshi-owned licensed slaughter houses and abattoirs have come under scrutiny of the Hindu Right groups and some State agencies.

4. A later Bombay High Court judgement of January 2017, struck down the provisions of this Act dealing with the procurement of beef

from outside Maharashtra. The court argued that if beef is procured from a place where it has been sold legally, then the person buying it can consume it within Maharashtra. This means that there have to be mechanisms in place to not just identify meat found in possession of people but also its geographic provenance. This, as we have seen in cases of recent incidents of mob lynching, proves to be a contentious and often violent task.

5. The most stunning of these cases occurred in September 2015, in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, where Mohammed Akhlaq was lynched by a Hindu mob, comprising mainly of self-styled *gau rakshaks* who suspected his family of storing, what they believed to be, beef in their refrigerator. The alleged beef was subsequently put to a forensic examination to test for its provenance.

6. A. Masoodi, "Who is a Gau Rakshak?," (2016), <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/Mi6HZpayTzwJT7G6zy8dTO/Who-is-a-Gau-Rakshak.html> (accessed on 8 November 2016).

7. Scroll staff, "Come Smell the Cow Carcasses, Dalits Tell Gujarat Tourism Face Amitabh Bacchhan," (2016), <http://scroll.in/latest/816461/come-smell-the-cow-carcasses-dalits-tell-gujarat-tourism-face-amitabh-bachchan-in-1100-postcards> (accessed on 8 November 2016).

8. One of the stated aims of the Azadi Kooch was to return possession of land to these families. However a day before the march, the District Collector of Banaskantha District, where this land falls, intervened and the land was handed over. The reclaiming of land by Dalit families is a powerful moment in a context where they have been ritually and forcefully kept away from land. According to caste norms, untouchable castes are forbidden from owning property. However, in the absence of a much larger movement for land redistribution for the Dalits, this episode remains largely symbolic in nature.

9. The word 'bovine' comes from the Latin '*bos*' and '*bovinus*' which means 'ox'. In the biological classification system, the family 'Bovidae' and the subfamily 'Bovinae', consists of domestic cattle (including cow, bull and ox) and buffalos (including species such as water buffalo, Wild Asian water buffalo and African buffalo). The term 'cattle' denotes the species *Bos Taurus* which includes the adult calf bearing female 'cow', the adult female before having a calf 'heifer', the adult male 'bull' and the castrated male 'ox' which is primarily used for draft purposes. Young ones of both sexes are called calves. The *mithun* and the yak are also included under Bovinae.

10. Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, “Basic Animal Husbandry and Fisheries Statistics, (2014–15),” (New Delhi: Government of India, 2016), <http://dahd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Final%20BAHS%202014%2011.03.2015%20%202.pdf> (accessed on 16 July 2018), 3.

11. *Ibid.*, 4.

12. *Ibid.*, 6.

13. Shraddha Chigateri, “‘Glory to the cow’: Cultural difference and social justice in the food hierarchy in India,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 10–35; 17.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Assocham India, “Tamil Nadu Pips UP and West Bengal in Leather and Leather Products Exports: Study,” (25 March 2015), <http://www.assochem.org/newsdetail.php?id=4905> (accessed on 10 July 2016).

16. Interview with Puran Dawar, President of the Agra Footwear Manufacturers and Exporters Chamber, Agra, 20 June 2014.

17. Charu Gupta, “The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India: ‘Bharat Mata’, ‘Matri Bhasha’ and ‘Gau Mata,’” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2001): 4291–4299; 4295.

18. D.N. Jha, *Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2015), 19.

19. Shraddha Chigateri, “Negotiating the Sacred Cow: Cow Slaughter and the Regulation of Difference in India,” *Democracy, Religious Pluralism and the Liberal Dilemma of Accommodation*, M. Mookherjee, ed. (London: Springer, 2011), 142.

20. *Ibid.*, 143.

21. *Ibid.*

22. James McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 86.

23. It is to be noted that in both Buddhism and Hinduism, while plants are a major source of pleasant smells, the stinking and ritually impure smells, such as urine and excrement come from animals, other than pure and good smelling dairy products. *Ibid.*, 75, 89.

24. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 18.

25. *Ibid.*, 38.

26. Within Buddhism, the tenet of right action in the context of the animal-human relationship meant ‘abstinence from conscious

destruction of any sentient being from human to smallest animalcule. Despite this doctrinal stand, slaughtering of animals was still practiced on a wide scale during this time. Buddha is reported to have told the physician Jivaka that he forbade the eating of meat only when there was evidence of your eyes or ears as grounds for suspicion that the animal was slain for personal consumption. No meat was consumed without enquiry as to its provenance—unseen, unheard and unsuspected meat became 'the three pure kinds of flesh' in Buddhist tradition. *Ibid.*, 62, 64. This is an interesting observation as far as the politics of the senses is concerned.

27. The superiority of a non-meat consuming position can be explained through changes in the political economy with settled agriculture becoming the predominant mode of agrarian production. See F.J. Simoons and D.O. Loderick, "Background to Understanding the Cattle Situation of India: The Sacred Cow Concept in Hindu Religion and Folk Culture," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (H. 1/2) (1981): 121–137, for a detailed analysis of the breakup of the earlier nomadic order in favour of a more material civilisation in which cattle was considered extremely valuable. Cattle were thus converted into property and considered part of wealth. A Vedic Hindu culture of excessive cattle sacrifice would thus stand out in this context. The Buddhist doctrinal advocacy of compassion towards animals would also be a far more attractive option. Alongside this, there was also the advent of Jainism which, unlike Buddhism, refused to follow a pragmatic path and adhered to the strictest form of non-violence towards all living beings. This would have created further ethical and moral issues for a civilisational order based on animal sacrifice.

28. See R.S. Khare, "A Case of Anomalous Values in Indian Civilization: Meat-eating Among the Kanya-Kubja Brahmans of Katyayan Gotra," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 25, no. 2 (1966): 229–240. Khare presents the case of the Katyayan Gotra among the Kanya-Kubja Brahmins who are meat-eating. Occupying a ritually high status, the Gotra attribute their meat-eating habit to the Shakta cult of worship. Among other Brahmin groups this is regarded as an adherence to their '*kul-dharma*' (sacred duty or practice of their community) and thus does not evoke ostracism.

29. The Cow Protection Movement has been analysed in detail by various scholars. Gupta looks at the way in which the nation was associated with feminine symbols of Bharat Mata, *Matri Bhatia*

(Mother-tongue) and *gau-mata* by the nationalist movement in the twentieth century (See Gupta, *The Icon*). Sharaddha Chigateri in *Glory to the Cow* examines the implications of the sacrality of the cow for the Dalit groups in the country. Peter Robb, “The Challenge of Gau Mata: British policy and religious change in India, 1880–1916,” *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (1986): 285–319, provides an analysis of the politics around the cow with regard to the British intervention in the social and political scenario in India. See Anand Yang, “Sacred symbol and sacred space in Rural India: Community mobilization in the Anti-Cow Killing riot of 1893,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 04 (1980): 576–596. Yang focuses on the instances of ‘cow related’ killings of the nineteenth century in the context of the complicated dynamics between the Arya Samaj, the Hindu and the Muslim communities.

30. S.B. Freitag, “Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a “Hindu” Community,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 04 (1980): 597–625, 622.

31. Shahana Bhattacharya, “Rotting Hides and Runaway Labour: Labour Control and Workers’ Resistance in the Indian Leather Industry, c. 1860–1960,” *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, Ravi Ahuja, ed. (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), 47–96.

32. Tanuja Kothiyal, “History Teaches Us Why Today’s Self-Styled Gau-Rakshaks Will Harm The Cattle-Rearing Economy,” <https://scroll.in/article/833809/history-tells-us-why-todays-self-styled-gau-rakshaks-will-harm-the-cattle-rearing-economy> (accessed on 21 July 2018).

33. Radhika Govindrajan, “How to Milk a Cow in India: Reclaiming Gau-Seva from Gau-Rakshaks,” (2018), <https://thewire.in/economy/cow-beef-gau-rakshak> (accessed on 21 July 2018).

34. Mark Juergensmayer, “Gandhi and the Cow: The Ethics of Human/Animal Relationships,” *Between the Species* 1, no. 1 (1985): 11–17, 11.

35. Mahatma Gandhi, “Gauraksha ki Shartein,” *Gau-seva ki Vichardhara*, R.K. Bajaj, ed. (Varanasi: Akhil Bhartiye Sarv Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1956), 16.

36. *Ibid.*, 14.

37. *Ibid.*, 20.

38. The lynching of five Dalit men in Jhajjar district, Haryana, in August 2003, for the mistaken impression that cow slaughter was

being committed openly, and the stripping naked of two Muslim cattle traders in South Canara district in March 2005 by Right-wing Hindu groups for the alleged illegal transport of cattle, attest not just to the highly-charged symbolism around the cow but also to the discrimination that attends communities that do not accept the dominant ethic against cow slaughter. Chigateri, *Glory to the Cow*, 15. In 2001, D.N. Jha's book, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, was banned because it sought to equate Vedic India with beef consumption. Around the same time, the erstwhile BJP-led central government sought to erase the history of Hindu Indian beef-eating practices from the syllabus of the National Council of Educational Research and Training. Then, in the run-up to the general elections of 2004, the majority BJP-led central government sponsored a Prevention of Cruelty to Cows Bill based on a report of the National Commission on Cattle in 2002 which not only endorsed a comprehensive ban on the slaughter of the cow and its progeny, but also recommended that persons who contravened the legal prohibitions on cow slaughter be tried under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) of 2002. Although the Bill was later retracted owing to a lack of consensus on the issue and widespread opposition to it, the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh subsequently pushed ahead with its own draconian legislation—the Madhya Pradesh Cow Slaughter Ban Ordinance of January 2004—with the official argument that 'Manu Smriti ranks the slaughterer of cow as a predator and prescribes hard punishment for him.' *Glory to the Cow*, 16.

39. Gandhi, "Gaurakha ki Shartein," 20.

40. Large scale policy changes in the 1970s in the leather industry impacted the processes of flaying and tanning. With the emphasis shifting to the export of high value products, the export of raw hides and skins was banned in 1973. The government then set up leather corporations to regulate hide collection and flaying activities. This brought in the zilla parishads (District Councils), which were empowered under the Kshetria Samiti Act, to regulate 'offensive trades' through licensing and fee structures. Thus the processes of flaying, tanning, extracting bones, horns and offals of the animal, all came under the zilla parishad and hides became a profitable commodity, away from the public health concerns of a 'nuisance' trade. Under this arrangement, the traditional rights of the flayer to the commodity of hide moved to the contractor, but the defiling work remained with the flayer. This did not remain uncontested and a series of complicated court cases on the rights over hide ensued. Under the orders

of the Supreme Court, the state governments began forming cooperatives with 'genuine flayers', which would now be the sole recipients of hide collection and flaying licences in a block. While many groups of flayers could form cooperatives, many dummy ones were also floated by contractors from outside these communities. Many of these were Brahmins and Thakurs from the villages who were engaged in a wage labour relationship with flayers in the cooperative once the contract was won. A. Pathak, "State, Law and Leather Co-operatives of Uttar Pradesh," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 39 (1997): A136-A139; A 139.

41. B.R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol 5, Vasant Moon comp. (New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2014), 256–57.

42. Awadhendra Sharan, *In the City, Out of Place: Nuisance, Pollution and Dwelling in Delhi, c. 1850–2000* (Delhi: OUP, 2014), 89.

43. Sharan, *In the City*, 73.

44. A.E. Vogelaar, "Fatal Abstractions: A Reflection on Cinema, Suburbia, and Slaughter," *JAC* (2012): 337–446.

SHIVANI KAPOOR is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Writing Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India. Her email is skapoor@jgu.edu.in